Pakistan–Russia Relations Redux: From Estrangement to Pragmatism

Muhammad Nawaz Khan*

Abstract

Pakistan-Russia relations have a complex history of divergences, contradictions and ambiguities that heightened during the Cold War and subsequent era of Afghan *Jihad*. However, the gradual rapprochement that paved the way for institutionalised engagement started after Pakistan joined the war against terrorism. Based on secondary review of academic and online sources, this article explores how relations between the two countries evolved from estrangement to institutional engagement, with a special focus on why this relationship is significant for both. Economic, energy, defence, counterterrorism, and socio-cultural domains are the important variables that are discussed. Given existing geopolitical compulsions like Moscow's quest for playing a decisive role in Afghanistan's security calculus; Pakistan's pursuit for coming out of the United States' straitjacket and finding alternative regional partners offer the reasons, challenges and outlook in shaping prospective ties. It is argued that Pakistan-Russia ties are likely to improve in the future, especially in terms of economic, defence and counterterrorism cooperation.

Keywords: Bilateral Relations, Cold War, Defence Cooperation, Counterterrorism, Geopolitics, Regional Fragility.

* The author is Research Officer at the Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI), Islamabad, Pakistan. He can be reached at: nawazverdag915@hotmail.com.

@2019 by the Islamabad Policy Research Institute.
IPRI Journal ■ XIX (1): 56-85.
https://doi.org/10.31945/iprij.190103.

products,[57] tangerines and potatoes to the Russian Federation.[58] Russian exports to Pakistan include fertilisers, paperboard, raw ferrous and ferrous products.[59]

Pakistan-Russia trade has witnessed a gradual rise from USD 95 million in 1980[60] to USD 660 million in 2018.[61] According to Yury Kozlov, Russia's trade representative, trade between both countries is expected to grow up to approximately USD 750-800 million by the end of 2019.[62] To further strengthen economic relations, Islamabad and Moscow are considering signing a Free Trade Agreement (FTA).[63] In this regard, Pakistan's Ministry of Finance, Revenue and Economic Affairs, coupled with other relevant ministries, were tasked to prepare recommendations when Islamabad accepted Moscow's proposal to enter into a FTA during the former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's visit to Astana during the 17th meeting of the Heads of the State Council of the SCO on June 7, 2017.[64]

---

[57] Hussain and Fatima, "Pak-Russian Relations: Historical Legacies and New Beginnings," 8.

[58] Muhammad Naseer, *Export of Kinnow*, report (Karachi: Trade Development Authority of Pakistan, Government of Pakistan, 2010), 21, https://www.tdap.gov.pk/doc_reports/TDAP_REPORT_ON_EXPORT_%20OF_KINNOW.pdf.

[59] Hussain and Fatima, "Pak-Russian Relations: Historical Legacies and New Beginnings," 8.

[60] "Russia Eyes $ 600 million Trade with Pakistan," *Pakistan Today*, December 27, 2012, https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2012/12/27/russia-eyes-600-million-trade-with-pakistan/.

[61] "Pakistan-Russia Trade Likely to Reach $800m," *Express Tribune*, December 29, 2018, https://tribune.com.pk/story/1876880/2-pakistan-russia-trade-likely-reach-800m/; and Almas Haider Naqvi and Yasir Masood, "Rejuvenating Pakistan-Russia Relations: Discernable Trends and Future," *Strategic Studies* 37, no. 4 (2017): 18-38 (30), http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2-SS_Almas_and_Yasir-_No-4_2017.pdf; and "Pakistani-Russian Bilateral Trade in 2015," *Russian Exports*, August 11, 2016, accessed September 30, 2016, http://www.rusexporter.com/research/country/detail/4868/.

[62] "Russia-Pakistan Bilateral Trade to Reach US$800 million by Year End: Yuri Kozlov," *Mettis Global*, December 28, 2018, https://mettisglobal.news/russia-pakistan-bilateral-trade-to-reach-us800-million-by-year-end-yuri-kozlov/.

[63] Ghulam Abbas, "Pak-Russia Seek Trade Liberalisation," *Pakistan Today*, December 8, 2011, https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2011/12/08/pak-russia-seek-trade-liberalisation/.

[64] Asif Bhatti, "Pakistan, Russia to Sign Free Trade Agreement," *Geo News*, June 22, 2017, https://www.geo.tv/latest/146752-pakistan-russia-to-sign-fta; and "PM Nawaz Arrives in Kazakhstan to Attend SCO Summit," *Express Tribune*, June 8, 2017,

These economic prospects are likely to be cemented under transnational mega projects like the BRI and its pilot project China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), EurAsEC,[65] the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation,[66] and Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline (IP).[67] Pakistan's geostrategic location is central to the restoration of the Silk Route and Eurasian integration;[68] and its significance in Pan-Eurasian assimilation cannot be sidelined in Kremlin. Hence, it is not surprising that Russia has shown interest in becoming part of the CPEC project, manifested in the Russian Ambassador to Pakistan, Alexey Y. Dedov's statement, 'Russia 'strongly' supported CPEC as it was important for Pakistan's economy and also regional connectivity.'[69] Any Indian endeavours to sabotage the initiative could likely be counteracted by Moscow's formal presence in the project as a strong stakeholder. This was

https://tribune.com.pk/story/1430418/pm-nawaz-arrives-kazakhastan-attend-sco-summit/.

[65] Alexander Mercouris, "Putin's Grand Strategy: The Greater Eurasia Project," *Duran*, June 30, 2016, http://theduran.com/putins-grand-strategy-greater-eurasia-project/; and Marlene Laruelle, "Russia's Eurasianist Soft Power in Central Asia" (Moscow: Eurasian Studies, 2017), http://greater-europe.org/archives/3190. This is an encouraging sign for a potential collaboration with the BRI and CPEC that would increase Pakistan's importance for Russia. Creating anarchy and establishing peace are two competing forces in the global political arena which states use for maintaining their unilateralism, while at the same time achieving regional economic integration through multilateralism. It seems that the US and India are struggling to maintain their *status quo* power and hegemonic status evident in the US intervention in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Afghanistan, and India's stubbornness in not resolving the Kashmir dispute. On the other hand, Russia, China, Pakistan and Iran believe in regional integration in which regional peace is prerequisite for achieving economic integration through initiatives like BRI, CPEC and EurAsEC.

[66] ADB, *Proposed Multitranche Financing Facility Islamic Republic of Pakistan: Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Corridor Development Investment Program*, report (Mandaluyong: Asian Development Bank, 2017), https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/project-documents/48404/48404-002-rrp-en.pdf .

[67] Naqvi and Masood, "Rejuvenating Pakistan-Russia Relations: Discernable Trends and Future," 25.

[68] Yasir Masood, "Rekindled Pak-Russia Relations," *Express Tribune*, August 9, 2016, https://tribune.com.pk/story/1159081/rekindled-pak-russia-relations/.

[69] Sachin Parashar, "Russia Supports China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Project: Russian Envoy Alexey Y. Dedov," *Economic Times*, December 19, 2016, http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/russia-supports-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-project-russian-envoy-alexey-y-dedov/articleshow/56037725.cms.